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First record of the Saddled snake eel *Pisodonophis semicinctus* (Richardson, 1848) in Italian waters (Osteichthyes, Ophichthidae)

Summary - The authors report the capture of a Saddled snake eel *Pisodonophis semicinctus* (Richardson, 1848) off the southern coast of Sicily (Capo Scalambri, Punta Secca, Ragusa). This finding is the first record for the Italian ichthyofauna and also the third one for the Mediterranean Sea.

Key Words: *Pisodonophis semicinctus*, Anguilliformes, Osteichthyes, Sicily.

Riassunto - Primo rinvenimento di *Pisodonophis semicinctus* (Richardson, 1848) in acque italiane (Osteichthyes, Ophichthidae).

Gli autori comunicano la cattura di un esemplare di *P. semicinctus* avvenuta il 12 luglio 1997 a Sud di Capo Scalambri, Punta Secca, Ragusa (Lat. N 36°30'16" - Long E 14°30'00"). Il rinvenimento costituisce la prima segnalazione per le acque italiane e la terza per il Mediterraneo.

Parole chiave: *Pisodonophis semicinctus*, Anguilliformes, Osteichthyes, Sicilia.

Introduction

The Saddled snake eel *Pisodonophis semicinctus* (Richardson, 1848) belongs to the family Ophichthidae which includes the largest number of Anguilliformes living in the Mediterranean Sea. The species occurs in the eastern tropical Atlantic from Morocco to Angola (Leiby, 1990) and it has been found occasionally in the western Mediterranean (Bini, 1971; Blache *et alii*, 1973; Bauchot, 1986; Tortonese, 1987).

In particular, Dieuzeide & Roland (1958) reported a 812 mm long specimen of *P. semicinctus*, collected by M. Di Maio with a long line from a sandy-rocky bottom at a depth of 17 meters, east of the town of Cherchell, Algeria, on May 23, 1957. Escoubet and coll. (1981) recorded the capture of a living individual, approximately one meter long, by means of a trammel net from a Posidonietum, 20-30 meters deep, near Cassis, Bouches-du-

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Rhône, France, on November 20, 1980. Our research group is presently investigating and monitoring captures of unusual or rare fish species by fishermen along the coasts of Sicily. As a matter of fact this island occupies a central geographical position between the eastern and the western Mediterranean basins, so that the occurrence of lessepsian or Atlantic species in its waters is possible. We recently published a series of observations to this effect (Catalano *et alii*, 1985; Catalano & Zava, 1993; Catalano *et alii*, 1998).



Fig. 1 - Specimen of *Pisodonophis semicinctus* captured at Capo Scalambri, Punta Secca, Ragusa, Sicily (12 July 1997). Total length: 705 mm.

Material and methods

On 12 July 1997 a specimen of *P. semicinctus* was captured with a trawl net by the motor-trawler "Orsa Maggiore" owned by Messrs Trama of Scoglietti (Ragusa), 3 miles south of Capo Scalambri, Punta Secca, Ragusa (Malta Channel) (Lat. N 36°30'17" - Long. E 14°30'00"). The Saddled snake eel was collected in a Posidonietum at a depth of about 30 meters. The iden-

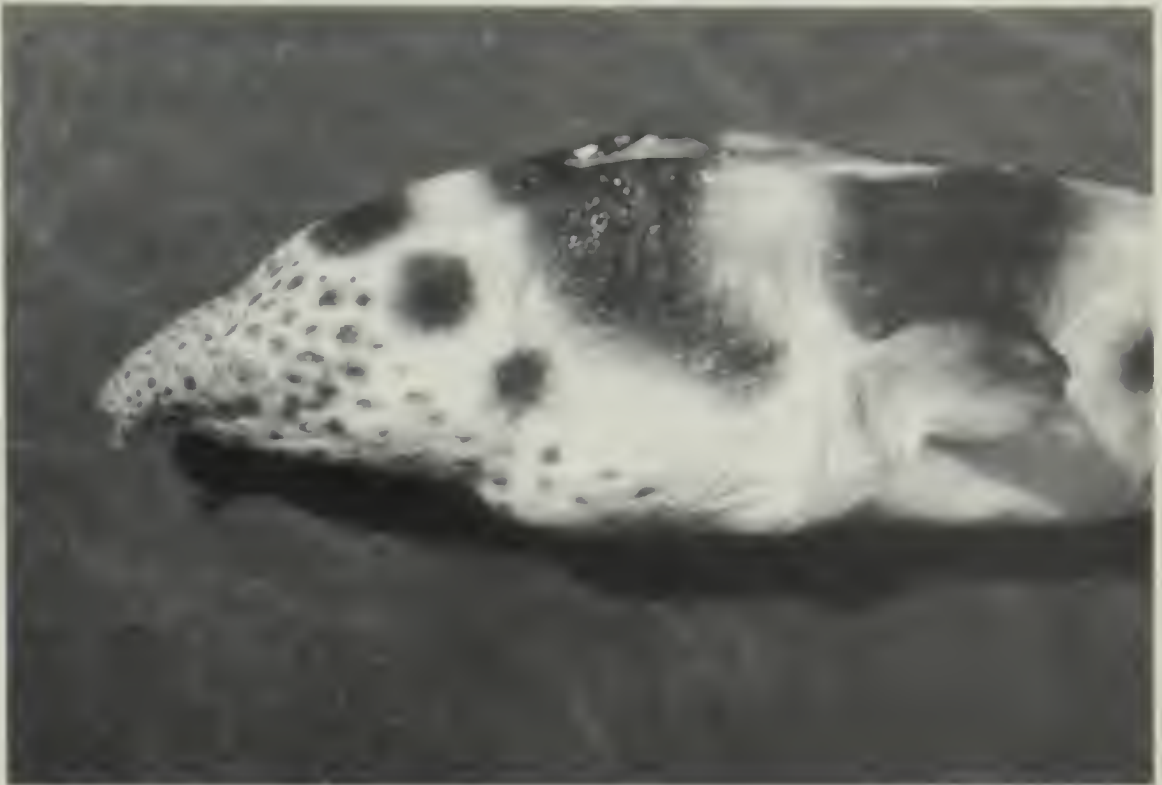


Fig. 2 - Detail of the head of the specimen. The cut on the head occurred during the killing of the fish.



Fig. 3 - The presence of the dark saddle-like patches makes this taxon unique among Mediterranean anguilliformes.

tification was carried out according to Bauchot (1986); vertebrae were counted by means of X-ray analysis kindly performed for us by Drs Elio Criscione and Ernesto Turlà (Ragusa).

Results and discussion

The peculiarity of the features convinced the fishermen to contact the curator of the Museo of Comiso; the fish is now preserved as a formaldehyde specimen in the collections of the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale, Comiso, Ragusa, Italy. Its elongate body, the saddle-like dark patches over a yellowish background and the tubular anterior nostrils make the identification unmistakable (Figs. 1-3). Other data are: total length 705 mm; 18 saddle-like patches; pectoral fins with 10 rays; total number of vertebrae 157; weight 269.6 g. This finding is the first record for the Italian ichthyofauna and, as far as we know, also the third one for the Mediterranean Sea.

Acknowledgements

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